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Norman Podhoretz

New Left's Enemy From Within

"I made a decision about a year ago to fight this thing. I took a three-month leave. I hadn't really had a vacation in all the 10 years I had been editing Commentary. I went away to the country all by myself. A lot of things came together. I came out with a much clearer idea, if you will forgive my pomposity, of what my duty was—to tell the truth, as I saw it. This decision involved me in a lot of unpleasantness, public and private. Your whole personal map has to be redrawn. The only way I could do this was to do it as my duty. You have to be loyal to that duty."

By Thomas Grubisich

NEW YORK—Norman Podhoretz, the editor of one of the most influential intellectual journals in the country, the publisher of radical critics and writers like Paul Goodman, Edgar Z. Friedenberg, Staughton Lynd and Norman Mailer before they had won a cachet or when they were in disrepute, was telling why he decided to make total war on the New Left, the Movement, the counter-culture—in effect, many of the radical social and political impulses Podhoretz, as Commentary's editor, had cultivated in the early 1960s.

In recent issues of the magazine, Podhoretz and his well-armed firing-line of contributors have accused the New Left and other radicals of philistinism, anti-intellectual aggression, nihilism, historical reductionism, revolution, neo- and proto-fascism, authoritarianism, crisis-mongering and, alas, bad manners.

The most serious accusation, though has been plain and simple anti-Americanism. It is no coincidence that most of the charges have been hurled at contributors to another intellectual journal, one street up in midtown Manhattan, the New York Review of Books. Commentary and the New York Review share many readers and even some contributors, but Podhoretz had made up his mind. As the medium for so many debased, false and dangerous ideas, he said, NYR was guilty of "trahisons . . . against the defining values of the intellectual life . . ."

Commentary and the New York Review, purely in terms of circulation, are small journals. Commentary, with 60,000 circulation, and NYR, with 100,000, don't have as many readers in all the country as some mass-circulation magazines (like Time or Newsweek) have in one major city. But, as the people in the media offices say, it is the demographics that matter. Thousands of intellectuals—and intellectual-watchers—read one or both journals. And both are popular at those universities—the Columbias, the Harvards, the Berkeleys—which have been the stages for the ferment that has been acted out—or at least argued out—on American campuses.

Chairmen of humanities and social-science departments in major colleges and universities, in a recent poll, named NYR and Commentary as two of the four journals they read most regularly. (The other two, Partisan Review and Dissent, have fewer readers than there are angels that can dance on a head of a pin.)

The chief significance of NYR and Commentary is not that they are preferred by college department heads to Time or Newsweek. They are significant because they are a pretty reliable seismograph, recording all the squiggles on the graph, all the ups and downs, as intellectuals react to the New Left and all its various subsidiaries. Whether Podhoretz is right or wrong in his judgment on the New Left, he is surely correct when he says that how intellectuals stand on this issue will gain or lose them respect for a generation to come.

Podhoretz has been beckoned by his duty to tell the truth, "as I saw it," before. It impelled him, at the age of 23, nearly 20 years ago, to write a review of Saul Bellow's "The Adventures of Augie March" accusing the author of an uncritical celebration of the American way of life.

This assessment cut sharply against the opinions of the prestigious circle of New York intellectuals, who had adopted Podhoretz into their group, giving him early literary eminence. (Sometime later, as he recalled in his book "Making It," he was accosted by a drunken well-known poet, and admirer of Bellow, "We'll get you for this if it takes 10 years.")

His duty also impelled Podhoretz to write an impressive, sympathetic and essentially affirmative essay on Norman Mailer in 1959, when Mailer was being called a burned-out talent.

In 1963, determined to become "the man I now have a duty to be," Podhoretz wrote an essay called "My Negro Problem—And Ours." In it he spoke of his residual "hatred" for Negroes, a legacy of some painful racial experiences from his childhood in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn. So "twisted and sick" were white Americans in their attitudes toward blacks, he wrote, that only a melding of the races through intermarriage, not integration, would give blacks their rightful equality. Podhoretz received many cheers for his "courage," but just as often he was accused of racism and of confusing his own, admittedly "twisted" feelings for other, less crippling white attitudes.

Podhoretz' most audacious response to the summons of his duty was his confessional "Making It," published in 1967. In it he told of his discovery, at the age of 35, that "success was better than failure . . . was better to be rich than poor . . . it was better to give orders than to take them . . . it was better to be recognized than to be anonymous." Anticipating adverse reviews, which came in abundance, Podhoretz said in his preface, "I will no doubt be accused of self-inflation and therefore of tastelessness." But not even

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